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Decolonization and the Third World

by Jessica Namakkal | Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023), Towards Third Worlding

ABSTRACT This essay asks why the Third World has become a symbol of poverty and failed infrastructure while the political imperative towards decolonization has gained popularity. By examining histories of decolonization in mid-twentieth century and the subsequent establishment of postcolonial nation-states that often ignored, suppressed, or actively participated in settler colonial occupations both globally and internally, I argue that there needs to be a widespread reckoning with what constitutes anti-colonial liberation.

KEYWORDS Fourth World, Third World, anti-colonial, decolonial, settler colonialism

The Third World project and decolonization are two interconnected ideas with deeply intertwined histories—decolonization was, in many instances, a key demand of the Third World project—yet the post-1970s history of these movements have diverged in many ways. In contemporary cultural discourse, the Third World is treated as a place (the space of the former colony) problematically fixed in time (the time of the backwards, pre-colonial past), while decolonization has gained traction as a verb that can be applied to virtually anything, from university curricula, to the IMF < https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/11/26/it-is-time-to-decolonise-the-world-bank-and-the-imf> , to museums < https://decolonizethisplace.org/bk-musuem> , to settler occupied land.[1] While some of these invocations of decolonization are marketing ploys meant to sell exorbitantly priced skin care products, decolonization as a movement that centers the repatriation of

indigenous land and a rethinking of the supposed end of colonial history has become the horizon of anti-colonial politics. This runs contrary to the fate of the Third World, which, as a noun, has become a signal of the failure of the anti-colonial politics of the past. Towards third worlding and building out solidarity between contemporary movements struggling with how to use anti-colonial history towards liberatory futures, this essay asks: how did decolonization and the Third World come to hold such different meanings and possibilities, and what would it mean to reimagine the Third World as a space of ongoing decolonization? One potential answer that I explore here is that many Third World nation-states, after achieving independence, compromised the Third World project's ideal of global decolonization by accepting forms of settler colonialism and internal colonialism as distinct and separate from what became known "alien" or "foreign" rule, dividing already ruptured populations into even smaller factions.

What Happened to the Third World?

Despite the rich and complex histories of political movements that "invented" the Third World, the term has come to signal a geographically specific constellation of poverty, corruption, and backwards-ness associated with the former colonial and decolonizing world.[2] The denigration of the term has built up over decades in U.S. popular culture and politics. Like clockwork, every time a crisis occurs in the United States that lays bare the deeply weak and flawed infrastructure of the state, people flock to media outlets to declare that this moment is so horrific precisely because it makes the US look like "a third world country." In February 2021, when severe winter weather knocked out power and cut off clean water supplies throughout Texas and neighboring states, leaving millions of people without heat or water, Twitter ballooned with comments comparing the US to a generic third world country. Just weeks prior to this, when white supremacists stormed the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, many rushed to make an argument that what had occurred was a coup, which had transformed the United States

into, you guessed it, a third world country. Everyone from CNN anchors to then President-elect Joe Biden made some sort of comment about how out of place, and third-worldish, the targeted violence seemed.[3]

While most media-savvy readers will understand the constant invocation of the third world to describe weakened infrastructure as hyperbole, it points to a truth that the idea of the Third World as an internationalist project of transnational solidarity and liberation is not widely understood or appreciated in US popular cultures and discourse. Take for example an essay that ran on NPR on January 8, 2021, two days after the Capitol riots, titled "Memo to the People of Earth: 'Third World' is an Offensive Term!" < https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2021/01/08/954820328/memo-to-people-of-earth-third-world-is-an-offensive-term> [4] The short piece engages with various people from the Third World who work for development NGOs, or just happen to come from these countries, quoting their dislike of the term as evidence of a universal disavowal of "Third World." They locate their dislike of the term "Third World" as stemming from a sense of being ranked lower than the First World (without giving much thought to the position of the former Soviet-bloc Second World). This disdain is premised on the idea that Third World countries are always aspiring to be First World countries, a sort of high stakes popularity contest that obscures the anti-imperial, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist politics that undergirded the formation of the Third World, and completely loses sight of the great importance of the Second World. Utilized in this way, the term is both depoliticized and dehistoricized, emptied of the radical politics and history that propelled the Third World as a liberatory project into existence.

While the Third World has been almost entirely drained of its original meaning and intention, the idea of decolonization has rapidly gained in popularity. I have been teaching courses on decolonization, as well as Global Studies courses that center Third World history, at Duke University for over a decade. In my experience, while most students have consistently entered the classroom with a distaste for the

idea of the Third World, citing many of the reasons mentioned above related to rankings and poverty, they have become increasingly excited about and interested in decolonization. While I have been quite heartened by the growing interest in decolonization, I find it interesting that students are so quick to dismiss the importance of the Third World as a continuing project while simultaneously embracing the urgent contemporary need for decolonization rooted in anti-imperialist and abolitionist principles.

History (as both an academic discipline and a web of popular discourse) has tended to treat decolonization as a firm rupture between the colonial world and the postcolonial world, a distinction that historians are now starting to question and reject, lagging behind people on the ground who have long noted that there is not much "post" in the postcolonial world.[5] Likewise, the Third World project is often constructed as a linear narrative consisting of "a birth, a flourishing, and then a death . . . bookended by the 1950s and the 1970s."[6] When decolonization is treated as a temporal break with the imperial world, all the problems of the postcolonial world, those also associated with the supposed decay of the Third World, become proof that the colonies were not prepared for self-rule, that European empires were correct in their assessments that the colonized needed the tutelage and structure so kindly given by the imperial forces. The belief that European empires, especially Britain and France, provided a net good in the world has in fact recently come back into fashion.[7] It is easy to blame the violence of empire on past actors, absolving those living in the present from taking responsibility for the global inequalities rooted in empire. Violence in the "postcolonial" world is thus supposedly rooted in, for example, terrorist barbarism, not in the actions of anti-colonial actors fighting for liberation from settler colonial occupation, as we see in the decades-long violence in Palestine.

Importantly, states that emerged from the ashes of anti-colonial struggles—the building blocks of the Third World—have often kept colonial institutions in place, from legal codes to systems of education, replacing the colonial ruler with the

supposedly postcolonial nationalist state. This leads us to ask, what makes a nation-state postcolonial? Is it right to theorize India or Israel as postcolonial states when they actively participate in settler colonial projects?[8] Despite arguments by historians of the Third World that the Third World was a project not limited by national borders or territories, that is how it tends to be remembered and treated: not only as a geographic space "left behind" by colonial progress, but a space that is undesirable and that should be relegated to the past. The transition within international relations and related fields to transform the Third World into a space in need of international development, and thus to be referred to as "developing nations," was a way of taking autonomy away from the Third World and giving it back to the colonizers who would now be responsible for bringing modernity to those who lacked it.[9] It is not surprising that students today are more familiar with the Third World as a *place* of decay rather than a *project* of liberation.

Decolonization, Settler Colonialism, and the Making of Worlds

Like all projects, the Third World project has had successes and failures, especially as former colonies achieved independence throughout the twentieth century and entered the international stage as sovereign nation-states. As former colonies were brought into the world system, most often under conditions set by the global world powers and regulated through the United Nations, a deep gulf developed between the newly independent nation-states and indigenous nations and populations around the world who continued (and continue) to suffer under the ongoing system of settler colonialism, from Turtle Island to Aotearoa to Palestine, and everywhere in-between. The idea that global colonialism ended with the physical departure of imperial states from colonies stemmed from a United Nations Resolution adopted on December 16, 1952. Resolution 637, "The

Right of Peoples and Nations to Self-Determination," stipulated that nations located *within* UN member states may not seek or obtain independence through self-determination.[10] This clause became known as the "blue water rule" or "salt-water thesis," because the United Nations only considered nations ruled by powers *across water* as colonial spaces worthy of the right to self-determination. Any nations that lay on territories within the new states were thus not officially colonized, and were subject to the governance of whomever had control over the territory they lay within.

As Adom Getachew wrote in her book *Worldmaking After Empire*, the salt-water thesis was the moment when "alien rule was differentiated from settler colonial experiences through the requirement of geographic distance."[11] The inability (which was often an outright unwillingness) of postcolonial elites and state makers to consider anything other than "overseas alien" rule as imperial has not only erased the ongoing destruction wrought by settler colonialism but has also given postcolonial states a free pass to ignore what many call internal colonialism, from the ongoing military occupation of Kashmir by the Indian government to the continued struggle by the EZLN in Chiapas against the Mexican state. Although the United Nations eventually adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007, it had earlier been blocked in 2006 after twenty-two years of negotiation. The stall was initiated by a "Namibian-led block of thirty African countries plus Western countries such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand."[12] All countries raised concerns over definitional issues regarding who constitutes an "Indigenous" people, the impact of the UNDRIP on state constitutions, and official state policies regarding "land claims" and ownership of "natural resources."[13]

At the historic moments of decolonization in Africa and Asia in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, many of the rising Third World nation-states chose to ignore calls for self-determination in settler colonial states *and within* their own states, choosing instead to negotiate with the United States, Canadian, Australian, and New

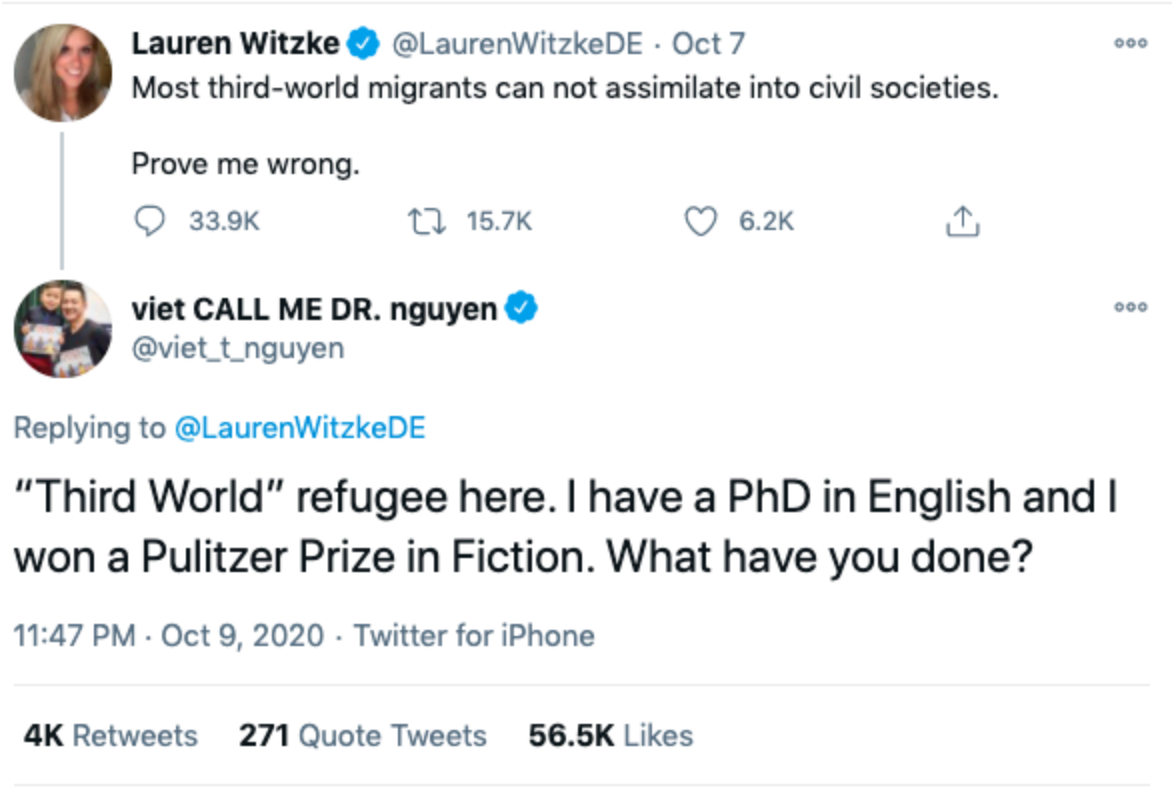
Zealand governments, ignoring the status of these states as settler colonial states, rather than see the project of the Third World as one for global decolonization. When emerging states did attempt to address internal struggles for liberation, they were quickly shut down, often by outside agencies located in the United States, as was clear in Indonesia and throughout Latin America.[14] The Third World as a liberatory project may be poorly understood, but it has been widely recognized as a legitimate political project. In contrast, while Indigenous activists around the world did actively call for decolonization of their territories during what is thought of as the high-period of decolonization (1950s–1970s), often drawing on and collaborating with Third World independence movements, this is not generally included in histories of the Third World.[15]

That settler states do not recognize themselves as colonial powers is part of the structure of settler colonialism.[16] This is not only a problem for Indigenous peoples in the First World. In a recent lecture, Naga Anthropologist Dolly Kikkon spoke of her experience growing up in Northeast India, an area the postcolonial Indian state officially labeled a "disturbed area," thus making the people within these territorial boundaries subject to military occupation and increased police surveillance.[17] Kikkon describes how the Indian state has profiled people in the Northeast as "suspicious, primitive, barbarians." The Third World as a world-making project may have been internationalist in scope, but it was also limited in that it focused primarily on organizing across colonies and former colonies that were making claims for statehood, failing to consider the continuation of settler colonialism in large parts of the world.

Towards New Worlds

What does decolonization mean on Turtle Island today, especially for people who are not Indigenous and are not ancestors of enslaved African peoples? A particularly thorny problem emerges when immigrants from the Third World rush

to defend their place of origin and their success as migrants *without* an acknowledgement of the role they play in the continuing settler colonial project. For example, during the long run-up to the 2020 elections, the (unsuccessful) Republican nominee for the United States Senate from Delaware, Lauren Witzke, tweeted "Most third-world migrants cannot assimilate into civil societies. Prove me wrong."[18] Witzke's xenophobic tweet provoked a massive response as people who identify as "third-world migrants" rushed to prove just how accomplished, and assumedly assimilated, they are. Scholars, medical doctors, artists, politicians, business leaders, and really anyone with some sort of academic degree ratioed Witzke's original tweet into oblivion by sharing an avalanche of impressive credentials. These tweets proved that "third-world migrants" have in fact been very successful in the West, earning top degrees, becoming CEOs of major corporations, and carving out space to become members of the bourgeois elite. Novelist, academic, and Vietnamese refugee Viet Thanh Nguyen responded to Witzke with "'Third World' refugee here. I have a PhD in English and I won a Pulitzer Prize in Fiction. What have you done?"[19]


Lauren Witzke @LaurenWitzkeDE · Oct 7
Most third-world migrants can not assimilate into civil societies.
Prove me wrong.
33.9K
15.7K
6.2K
viet CALL ME DR. nguyen
@viet_t_nguyen
Replying to @LaurenWitzkeDE
"Third World" refugee here. I have a PhD in English and I won a Pulitzer Prize in Fiction. What have you done?
11:47 PM · Oct 9, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone
4K Retweets
271 Quote Tweets
56.5K Likes

Nguyen's defense of the third world migrant clearly struck a chord with people: his tweet received far more support than Witzke's original dog whistle ever garnered. Nestled within the threads were a few voices of dissent that took Nguyen and others to task for promoting the neoliberal individualism that is fully expected from "third-world migrants" in North America and most European countries. It also highlighted how migrants from certain parts of the Third World, primarily East/Southeast and South Asia have benefitted from the idea of the model minority but imbuing certain migrants with the innate ability for upward economic mobility. While Nguyen had placed Third World in quotation marks, perhaps noting his disapproval of the way that Witzke used the term, the effect of thousands of people re-tweeting his tweet with their own hyper-successful credentials meant to show the power of "third-world migrants" boosted the idea that the Third World migrant is, in fact, assimilable into the First World. This assimilation comes at the expense of those most deeply affected by the continuation of settler colonialism. The writer and activist Harsha Walia has

spoken and written extensively about the challenges and necessities of bringing together migrant justice with Indigenous sovereignty movements. She notes that this is often very uneven and traumatic terrain: while it may be true that many migrants and Indigenous people on Turtle Island have experienced oppression under colonialism, not all migrants had the same experience of being colonized, and many now benefit from property ownership made possible by land dispossession from Indigenous peoples.[20] While the Third World often fought for decolonization *across* borders, the decolonization that we need now would be for the abolition of borders. If we are to take our cues not from the anti-colonial nationalist struggles of the Third World, but instead from the histories of struggle that dreamed of another world all together, we might see the conversation begin to shift. I end here with one final example: in 1974, Secwepemc activist and thinker George Manuel published his manifesto *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality.* While he drew on his experiences with Third World organizing, he notes they were different projects. The Fourth World, in his formulation, could not be separate from other worlds because they were already too intertwined. He wrote "The Fourth World is no less open to others than it is to us."[21] Speaking in the present, Walia emphasizes the need for interdependence because "there is no liberation in isolation." Decolonization today means understanding that decolonization has never been a completed event, that postcolonial nation-states are still living in a time and space of colonialism, and that all states have the power to dispossess. The Third World project is ongoing, and so is decolonization. The two projects need to come together to be effective.

Notes

1. For some important discussions on what decolonization means in the present moment, see Gurminder K. Bhambra, Kerem Nisancioglu, and Dalia Gebrial, eds., *Decolonising the University* (London: Pluto, 2018); Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40; Andrew Curley, Pallavi Gupta, Lara Lookabaugh, Christopher Neubert, and Sara Smith, "Decolonisation is a Political Project: Overcoming Impasse between Indigenous Sovereignty and Abolition," *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* (2022): 1–20. I'm

not going to link to sites promising to decolonize your beauty standards, but believe me, those sites are everywhere. ↩

2. For a recent anthology on histories of the Third World, see Jeremy Adelman and Gyan Prakash, eds., *Inventing the Third World: In Search of Freedom for the Postwar Global South* (Bloomsbury, 2022). ↩

3. Shariana Ferrer-Núñez, Melody Fonseca, and Fernando Tormos-Aponte, "Why It's So Misleading to Call the Capitol Violence 'Third World,'" *Washington Post,* January 16, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/16/why-its-so-misleading-call-capitol-violence-third-world/ < https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/16/why-its-so-misleading-call-capitol-violence-third-world/> . ↩

4. Marc Silver, "Memo To People Of Earth: 'Third World' Is An Offensive Term!," *Goats and Soda*, NPR, January 8, 2021, https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2021/01/08/954820328/memo-to-people-of-earth-third-world-is-an-offensive-term < https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2021/01/08/954820328/memo-to-people-of-earth-third-world-is-an-offensive-term> . ↩

5. For example, Arundhati Roy, "How to Think about Empire," *Boston Review*, January 3, 2019, http://bostonreview.net/literature-culture-global-justice/arundhati-roy-avni-sejpal-challenging-%E2%80%9Cpost-%E2%80%9D-postcolonialism < http://bostonreview.net/literature-culture-global-justice/arundhati-roy-avni-sejpal-challenging-%E2%80%9Cpost-%E2%80%9D-postcolonialism> . The problematic temporal distinction between colonial and postcolonial is an issue I take up in my book *Unsettling Utopia: The Making and Unmaking of French India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021). ↩

6. Srirupa Roy, "The Death of the Third World: Curative Democracy and World-Making in Late 1970s India," in *Inventing the Third World: In Search of Freedom for the Postwar Global South*, ed. Jeremy Adelman and Gyan Prakash (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022): 239–260. ↩

7. In 2005, a law known as the law of 23 February 2005, was proposed that would have made it mandatory for French schools to recognize "the positive role of the French presence overseas, especially in North Africa." See Hervé Tchumkam, et al. "Banlieues." *Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020, pp. 101–8. The 2016 Brexit vote in Britain unleashed a torrent of imperial nostalgia that has not subsided. Catherine Hall, "The Racist Ideas of Slave Owners are Still with Us Today," the *Guardian,* September 26, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/26/racist-ideas-slavery-slave-owners-hate-crime-brexit-vote < https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/26/racist-ideas-slavery-slave-owners-hate-crime-brexit-vote> . ↩

8. Esmat Elhalaby, "A Dying Postcolonialism," *Abusable Past*, September 26, 2023, https://www.radicalhistoryreview.org/abusablepast/a-dying-postcolonialism <

https://www.radicalhistoryreview.org/abusablepast/a-dying-postcolonialism/> .

9. Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

10. UN General Assembly, Resolution 637, The Right of Peoples and Nations to Self-Determination, A/RES/637 (December 16, 1952), accessed May 3, 2021, https://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f0791c.html.

11. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 84–87.

12. Glen Sean Coulthard, "Introduction: A Fourth World Resurgent," introduction to *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*, by George Manuel and Michael Posluns (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), xxix.

13. Coulthard, introduction, xxixx.

14. Vincent Bivens, *The Jakarta Method: Washington's Anticommunist Crusade and the Mass Murder Program that Shaped Our World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2022).

15. On the development of movements for decolonization with the American Indian Movement, see Daniel M. Cobb, Sarah Barger, and Lily Skopp "A Sickness which Has Grown to Epidemic Proportions": American Indian Anti- and Decolonial Thought during the Long 1960s" *Comparative American Studies* 17, no. 2(2020): 199–223.

16. Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409.

17. Many areas of Northeast India have fallen under the category of "disturbed area" since the 1970s. Kashmir has had the same designation since 1990. Dolly Kikkon, "Are You Still Studying? Anthropology, Decolonization, and Practice," Center for India and South Asia Speaker Series, UCLA, December 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRD4yQu2Heo.

18. Lauren Wtizke, Twitter, October 7, 2020, 11:43am. https://twitter.com/LaurenWitzkeDE/status/1313867438770057218.

19. Viet Thanh Ngyuen, Twitter, October 9, 2020, 11:47pm, https://twitter.com/viet_t_nguyen/status/1314774482754494469 < https://twitter.com/viet_t_nguyen/status/1314774482754494469> .

20. Interview with Harsha Walia, "Prefiguring Border Justice," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2020), https://manifold.umn.edu/read/prefiguring-border-justice-interview-with-harsha-walia/section/96855cdc-5a01-45cd-9f1f-fc54b4ea6289 < https://manifold.umn.edu/read/prefiguring-border-justice-interview-with-harsha-walia/section/96855cdc-5a01-45cd-9f1f-fc54b4ea6289> .

21. George Manuel and Michael Posluns, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*, 1974 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 261.

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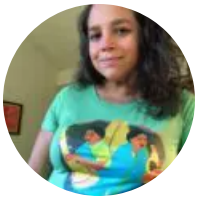

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